

Do you know the phrase “spiritual but not religious?” That’s how an increasing number of people describe themselves, especially here in the Northwest. A good many of them actually mean “I am spiritual without the inconveniences of religion.” Seems more than likely that they have experienced inflexibility or intolerance from people who have become “religious but not spiritual.”

Well, today we heard three stories and a psalm about what it means to be “spiritual *and* religious.” The Gospel story from Luke appears to be about Jesus healing a woman and breaking Sabbath rules; a story, perhaps, about religious inconveniences. The synagogue leader is indignant because Jesus has done something that, in the most formalistic sense, goes against the Mishnah, the teaching about how to keep a proper Shabbat. And so he tells the crowd not to come asking for healing on the Sabbath.

But that’s an odd choice, isn’t it? Because the woman hasn’t asked for anything. She has been afflicted for 18 years and is apparently in no hurry to be healed, so Jesus must be up to something else. If he waited until sundown, he could cure the woman without violating Sabbath restrictions. Episcopal theologian Fr. Robert Capon concludes that if Jesus had waited until sundown, his miracle would have supported the people’s expectations of a victorious and immortal Maccabean-style warrior king.

But then that’s not who Jesus was.

Religious teachings are life-affirming and fruitful when they counsel us to keep our hearts and minds open to God’s grace. But when *guidelines* harden into *rules* that make the institution of religion the primary focus, our teachings can choke the spirit and constrain us to seeing only in our most habitual ways. In time, we can become so hide-bound that we stop experiencing the living God. That is a form of spiritual sickness.

You see, the ancients thought of sickness differently than we do. First century Jews did not divide the human being into mind, body and spirit. These were simply three aspects of one *nephesh*, the Hebrew word that means “living being.” And so they would have heard something in Luke’s story that we might miss. The woman was bound by Satan with a spirit of infirmity. She had a spiritual malady, not a medical disease. We too readily think of her as having scoliosis, osteoporosis or arthritis, or some other *medical* condition

that made her physically unable to stand straight. But Luke makes no reference to her age or to any disease or injury or deformity. She had a *spiritual* affliction that caused her to spend the better part of her life looking down at the ground, perhaps just a few feet in front of her—never looking up, never looking farther out to a distant horizon, never looking up to the sky.

Evil, you see, works in banal ways, not in the spectacular ways that sell Hollywood blockbusters. One of the greatest powers that any evil spirit has is the ability to persuade us that we are useless failures in the eyes of God. That's all. They seek to blind us to God's loving liberating, forgiving presence with us, right here, right now.

Unfortunately, the church can play right into the hands of that spiritual blindness by inadvertently putting *what* we do ahead of *why* we do it. The synagogue leader has lost sight of what must come first. He is merely play-acting. That's what the word "hypocrite" refers to. In English, we have made the word much more condemning, but Jesus is only reminding the synagogue leader of something that he *knows*, but seems to have lost the spirit of.

In the back of his mind somewhere, the synagogue leader knows that people are allowed—encouraged, in fact—to do holy work on the Sabbath. And some part of him remembers that liberation from bondage is holy work because God liberated the Jews from Egypt. He remembers *what* to do, but lost the *why*. Jews obey the laws of God, not blindly, but as guidance against the persuasive power of evil inclinations and in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt.

The synagogue leader, a Pharisee, is becoming bound by his stubborn interpretation of the oral law pertaining to the Sabbath. He is becoming fixated on the rules of his religion just like the woman was fixated on the ground at her feet: both of them religious, in a sense, but no longer spiritual.

Fortunately, there is a remedy.

What God said to Jeremiah is the same life-affirming and loving spiritual truth that God speaks to the hearts of each and every human being: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." To be "religious *and* spiritual" is to remember God's presence with us and to allow some version of the psalmist's verse to arise naturally from our hearts: "For you are my hope, O Lord God, my confidence since I was young. I have been sustained by you ever since I was born; from my mother's womb you have been my strength; my praise shall be always of you."

The word religion means “rebinding” and that’s precisely what Jesus is up to. Satan has bound a Jewish woman—a daughter of Abraham—with a spirit of infirmity. There is also some unhealthy binding going on in the synagogue leader and likely in the community.

Jesus says something that gets lost in the English translation, in part because the phrase probably seemed a bit nonsensical to the King James translators. In the Greek, what Jesus says is this: “Was she not bound to be loosed from this bondage?” The mystery of Christ is right in there in the heart of that seeming paradox. The living God has bound this daughter of Abraham so that she can be loosed from the bonds of Satan. God’s binding her to God’s very self is what makes her truly free.

All Jesus did was to *tell* her that she was “loosed from her infirmity.” Now, “loosed” is not a term typically associated with healing, but it’s the same word Jesus used in his example of letting donkeys or oxen out of their stalls. And it matters that Luke places this story between the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven; two parables that focus on the wild, improbable and untamable in-breaking of the kingdom of the living God.

After pronouncing her to be free, Jesus lays hands on her. By touching her, he welcomes her back into relationship with the community. No wonder she stands up straight and praises God.

Now, people will tell you, if you ask, that they learn best when they are comfortable, when they know what’s happening and what’s coming. But all the research shows that people actually learn best when they are bumped just enough off-balance so that they have to readjust. The bump forces us to find new ways to make sense of our circumstances. Once the system is perturbed, new conversations arise and new possibilities show up. God waits in newly opened doorways to grant us fresh experiences of grace and hope and love.

I have a dear friend who has suggested that people read this morning’s passage from Hebrews *every time* we are preparing for Mass so that, through Scripture, God can perturb our perspectives again—just a little. When our hearts, minds and bodies—when our whole *nephesh* is open, then we are never worshipping on some terrifying, barely accessible mountaintop. Nor are we hide-bound by stifling rules.

Instead, when we gather at the Eucharistic table, we “...come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God,” even right here in Old Burien! We stand here in “the heavenly Jerusalem together with innumerable angels in festal gathering!” We come into “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in

heaven.” We come “to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

We come face to face with the Real Presence of the Risen Christ in the bread and wine. And this aisle—*this aisle*—is nothing less than a path to God’s heaven. Here, God shakes and perturbs anything in us that *can* be shaken so that our lives are reoriented toward the living God. Here, bound to God, we are loosed from our spirits of infirmity and loosed from everything else that can be shaken loose until the only thing that abides is that which cannot be shaken loose—the kingdom of heaven.

Look, then, to the approaching horizon of God’s kingdom. Live into God’s promise of freedom. Re-bind yourself to the Risen Christ in every moment of every day.

*That* is what it means to be “spiritual *and* religious.”

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